

***Frankenstein*: Success comes at a cost, but who pays the price?**

A teenage sensation!

Where do you start with a book like *Frankenstein*, Mary Shelley's classic novel? One of the greatest horror stories ever told, it's hard to believe it's over 200 years old. It's even harder to believe that Shelley wrote this terrifying tale, which many people believe helped to create the science fiction genre, when she was just eighteen years old!

ACTIVITY

What was the last horror/science fiction story you read or saw? What did you like about it (e.g. the plot, the characters, the setting, the atmosphere, etc.)? Would you recommend it or not? Share your ideas with the rest of the class.

How well do we really know *Frankenstein*?

Since it was first published in 1818, it's remained hugely popular – whether in its original form, or in adaptations for films or the theatre – and it's inspired countless imitations. It's so well-known it's become a victim of its own success – almost everyone thinks they know the story. If I asked you to name famous monsters from literature, I'd bet *Frankenstein* would be top of your list, or at least in the top three. So it might come as a bit of a surprise to hear that *Frankenstein* isn't a monster at all. He's actually the ambitious scientist who creates and gives life to the creature.

An under-rated writer?

Another common mistake is to dismiss the author as a 'one-hit wonder'. During her lifetime, Mary Shelley was a well-known writer and she published several novels, travel books, biographies and articles. However, in the years following her death, she was forgotten by scholars and the public alike, who only remembered her most famous work. Although she was long overshadowed by her husband – the Romantic poet Percy Bysshe Shelley, and his notorious friend Lord Byron – since the 1980s, Mary Shelley has finally been given the respect she deserves.

Her life itself would make a great film. Her parents were the feminist philosopher Mary Wollstonecraft and the philosopher and writer William Godwin. Tragically, her mother died soon after her birth, but her writing and philosophy influenced Mary Shelley throughout her life. Shelley had a very liberal and unconventional upbringing, growing up surrounded by intellectuals, writers and radical thinkers. Although she hardly went to school at all, by the time she was a teenager she had a much broader and more advanced education than most girls in those days, and she was much more free-spirited. To illustrate how different she was, it's worth noting that she ran away from home aged 15, and the rest of her life was no less unconventional (not to mention occasionally scandalous). Throughout her life, she liked to keep up-to-date with all the latest developments and discoveries – including (what was then) at the cutting edge of science – and this interest shines through in her great work, *Frankenstein*.

ACTIVITY

AI (Artificial Intelligence) is at the cutting edge of science and technology in today's world. What do you know about it? Have you used AI (e.g. ChatGPT), and if so, what for? What are the benefits and disadvantages of using AI, for yourself and for society in general (e.g. for education, health, jobs, etc.)? What might happen in the future – are you excited or worried about it? Discuss your ideas with a partner or in small groups. Do you and your group/partner have similar opinions?

What makes *Frankenstein* so special?

The final trap people often fall into is to think *Frankenstein* is simply a horror story, a spooky tale to tell at Halloween or round a campfire to give your friends nightmares. It's so much more than that, not least because many of the themes it explores – such as loss and grief, guilt and being an outcast from society – draw on things Mary herself experienced in her life and was still struggling to deal with. But for me, the most interesting theme of the book is the effects of ambition, and especially where it crosses the line into obsession. How far is Victor Frankenstein prepared to go, and what –

or *who* – is he willing to sacrifice to achieve his goals? What happens when, in chasing your dreams, you forget to consider the consequences of your actions on society, and on those closest to you? Who should pay the price for your ‘success’?

So, where do you start with a book like *Frankenstein*? Well, like any great novel, I’d recommend you start at the beginning!

TO GO FURTHER

Create your own monster

Divide the class into groups of four.

Students work together to create the best monster they can using body parts from well-known people (e.g. actors, pop stars, sportspeople, politicians, etc.)

1. In groups, students:

- decide which body parts they will use – e.g. whose head, body, arms and legs, brain, etc., and why – e.g. strength, intelligence, looks, etc.
- create a model of their monster, either by drawing it or cutting out pictures from magazines/the internet.

2. **Either:**

Groups present their monsters to the class and explain their choices. Encourage the others to say what they like about each monster.

Or:

Groups present their models to the class. Others try to identify which famous person each body part belongs to, before the group explains their choices.

3. Conduct a class vote on their favourite monster. You can extend the activity further by voting on, for example, the scariest, the funniest, the most intelligent, etc.

TO GO EVEN FURTHER

Groups discuss the abilities and characteristics of their chosen celebrities, then combine the best elements of each monster to create a ‘perfect class monster’.